

Stand and deliver

with a smile?

In the days of yore, highwayman would stand at the side of the road demanding payment for safe passage. Are technology vendors doing the same or do they provide value for money?

Over the last few years the nature of the supply business has changed and product vendors now provide a range of services that go beyond technology | to include maintenance agreements, training, product upgrades and more. Unfortunately, not all service is provided at the same standard and while many users express satisfaction, others vent their frustration at every opportunity. In the non-linear video editing market, those that shake their fists seem to be in the minority. In an independent survey carried out amongst video editors during the third quarter, most suppliers received a resounding thumbs up from highly satisfied users. Surprisingly, it wasn't only the major suppliers who came up trumps. Smaller vendors who have taken time to form personal relationships with their customers also fared well. At the top of the pile was Macro Video, scoring an overall satisfaction rating of 9.3 from the users of their popular Casablanca system.

Are suppliers accessible?

One of the key issues we considered in our survey was ease of access. How easy is it to request technical support and get answers to your questions? Among the popular brands all suppliers are readily accessible. Among the less popular brands however, access to support becomes a major issue. Users who've purchased equipment through a dealer that doesn't have a dedicated support team have experienced problems. The level of service varies from dealer to dealer and is often dependent on a product specialist who takes the time to understand a particular product.

This is particularly true of retail outlets that supply a range of options and leave you to select an editing solution for yourself.

Service problems seem to magnify when you rely on a system for your livelihood, so response times become critical. Again, big brand products supplied by specialist vendors deliver on their promise of providing reliable and prompt service, while fringe suppliers fall a little flat. In fact, Tony Abegglen from Video Ads in Cape Town summed it up nicely when he says that, "the local guys at Avid can't be praised enough ... nothing is too much trouble for them."

A constant gripe

One of the constant gripes users have revolves around the lack of spare parts carried by suppliers. Fortunately, all the major vendors have direct access to manufacturers and can supply pretty much anything within 48 hours. Quantel have even gone to the expense of locating a remote warehouse at Johannesburg International Airport administered 24 hours a day by DHL. This means local customers can get remote diagnostics direct from Quantel and if a fault is diagnosed, spares can be despatched and delivered within hours. Of course that kind of immediate response costs money, but if you're relying on your desk to put bread on the table, it makes sense to keep it running all the time.

User groups have also become a useful tool in providing customer support. Several vendors sponsor user groups that give their customers an opportunity to interact with one other and share solutions to problems. This allows users to pre-empt problems and solve them before

Service excellence — who's making the grade?

Evaluation Criteria	Average score	Accom by Multi Channel Media	Avid by Avid Technology	Casablanca by Macro Video	Discreet by Touchvision	Fast by Linkstar
1. Ease of access	8.0	8.7	8.4	8.9	7.0	8.2
2. Range of support options	4.7	5.6	5.7	4.1	5.5	3.6
3. Response time	6.5	7.8	6.1	8.8	6.0	7.2
4. System knowledge	8.0	8.8	8.8	9.2	8.0	9.6
5. Spares	6.5	6.0	7.4	7.1	6.7	7.5
6. Infrastructure	7.0	8.0	8.0	6.9	7.0	7.8
7. User groups	4.9	5.6	6.4	6.8	5.3	5.6
8. Web support	6.7	7.4	5.3	9.0	8.0	5.8
9. Telephonic support	7.5	8.0	8.4	8.9	7.5	7.6
10. Friendliness	7.5	9.2	8.7	9.4	8.7	9.2
11. Overall	8.0	8.2	8.4	9.3	7.4	7.4

Over 70 editors responded to our survey and gave us their insight into customer service. The average is calculated by taking all responses into account. Only those products and suppliers who had more than five replies are identified separately. These scores represent how satisfied customers are with the service they receive. Users with high end systems tend to expect better service than users with low cost technology and this satisfaction rating compares service delivery with user expectations.

IF SERVICE IS IMPORTANT TO YOU

- Purchase technology and support from a reputable dealer with a proven track record in the video business.
- Determine whether there is a user group and if you have access to an on-line support system.
- Ensure the support is available where you're going to be working.
- Consider the consequence of dealing with a smaller supplier. They can often provide custom service but when things go wrong and you can't afford to stop production, you may need to rely on a larger support infrastructure.
- Test the telephone support available and speak to other users about their experiences.
- Be wary of setting yourself up as a guinea pig. Being first with a new toy creates its own set of problems.
- Understand that as the cost of technology continues to fall, service will progressively become a separate item you'll have to pay for.
- Read the manual and accept responsibility for understanding your system. There's nothing worse than a customer who calls his supplier and blames them for everything that goes wrong. It is sometimes your fault.

they arrive. Of course, contact doesn't have to be face to face and the Internet provides a great mechanism for users to communicate. "We get all our support (for DPS Velocity) via a global user base sharing knowledge over the net," explains Nic Potgieter from Lodestar in Cape Town. "There are approximately 300 users on the list. These range from some of the biggest houses in the world to your average low end-user from LA to New York, Poland and China. If I post a problem it's sometimes answered within the hour. This list is actively attended by DPS and software fixes are immediately posted for serious and legitimate problems."

Telephone calls get you running

Despite the easy access provided by the web, sometimes a telephone call is all the help you need. All the major suppliers provide top-flight telephone support during normal office hours with after-hours support available through the original manufacturer. If you're looking at a non-linear editing solution, most big-name manufacturers will provide a service agreement that'll keep you working. They'll also back up their side of the bargain with qualified and friendly staff who go out of their way to keep your tape rolling. The problem seems to be with fringe brands supplied by vendors that don't understand the video business and who lack direct access to manufacturers.

To conclude, an interesting perspective comes from Iris Imaginacoes in Mozambique. "We experienced a problem with our Fast suite and identified it as a faulty motherboard. Linkstar dispatched replacement parts immediately which were installed by a local computer shop. The old motherboard was returned to Linkstar. No hassle, no bureaucratic barricades, no financial complications. Just a commitment from everybody concerned to get my system running again. If South African firms want to conduct business in neighbouring countries, they need to put aside their bureaucratic procedures." ■



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*"Macrovideo offer great service and excellent backup even after hours when it counts most."
Stefan Nel - Liquid Studios, Johannesburg*

*"Macrovideo don't sell you a Casablanca they offer you a new way of life."
Butch Coetzee - Fab Video Production, East London*

*"The bottom line is simple - the product is outstanding, the backup is 10 + in all respects."
Mike Davison - JDM PRO Durban*

Coming soon...

Casablanca Kron*

**German for crown of which the Oxford dictionary says
"Emblem of Victory"
"What rewards or consummates effort"*



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